

Rep. Don Young (R-Alaska) on Wednesday defended changes his staffers made to the notorious Coconut Road earmark, the third time in a year he took to the House floor in an attempt to justify one of his suspect pet projects.

Young also accused his GOP colleague, Rep. Connie Mack (Fla.), of first supporting the earmark in 2005, and then distancing himself from it once watchdogs and the media began raising concerns.

His 11-minute defense occurred during debate on the highway technical corrections bill when he asserted a point of privilege, a parliamentary move that allows a member to clarify a position on an issue when the lawmaker feels someone misstated his or her view publicly.

“These accusations have little, if any, connection with what actually occurred,” Young said.

“This project was asked for by the community and it was supported by the local congressman,” he said, implicating Mack without stating his name.

Ethics watchdogs have raised red flags over the Lee County, Fla., road project, the language of which was changed after that measure passed the House and the Senate but before it reached the president’s desk. Such a change may have violated House rules, which prohibit substantive alterations to bills during the enrollment process, the formal procedure in which a measure is recorded before it moves on to be signed by the president.

Young said Florida Gulf State University (FGSU) requested the \$10 million earmark for a study about building an interchange at Coconut Road. He argued that the local city of Bonita Springs wanted it because it would lead to reduced traffic and expedite evacuations during hurricanes. The school, he asserted, wanted to build a research center that would focus on transportation improvements.

Young noted the findings of a study commissioned by the school that recommended an on-ramp from Coconut Road to Interstate 75.

The earmark has been tainted by controversy. Lobbyist Rick Alcalde represented both FGSU as well as the company owned by Daniel Aronoff, a real estate developer who owned 4,000 acres along Coconut Road and helped organize a fundraiser for Young during one of his visits to the area in 2005. Both entities requested the Coconut Road earmark.

Alcalde has not returned several phone calls from The Hill.

Young flew to FGSU for a town hall meeting in 2005 on a chartered plane owned by a Michigan company; the owner told the Naples Daily News that the Aronoffs were among his biggest clients.

After the town hall, Young went directly to a fundraiser at the Hyatt Coconut Point, which Aronoff helped organize.

Young said Mack invited him to the town hall meeting. As required, Young's reelection campaign reimbursed the company \$3,422 for the flight.

Young also posted documents and photos on his website in an effort to demonstrate that Mack was deeply involved in the earmark. In one letter in March 2006 to FGSU's president, Mack supported it.

A Mack spokesman said his boss never asked for the earmark and only backed it once it became clear the money could not be re-directed to the I-75 widening project. Mack notes that point was made in another letter posted by Young, saying: "As a result of discussions with the Transportation Committee, it does not appear the \$10 million for the Coconut Road interchange project can or will be re-programmed for other purposes."

"It proves once and for all everything we ever said: that Mack never once asked for the money for the Coconut Road interchange, period, end of story," the spokesman said, adding that Mack stood by his community to make sure it received federal resources.

In his floor speech, Young even raised the specter of Hurricane Katrina to defend the project and its change.

Young said he decided to vote in favor of the technical corrections bill because he supports the position of a local Florida transportation commission that voted three times to send the money back to Washington because its members opposed the Coconut Road provision.

**The bill passed 358-51. In addition to Young, Rep. William Jefferson (D-La.), who faces federal trial on an array of corruption and bribery charges, voted yes. All 51 “no” votes were Republicans, including Reps. Jeff Flake (Ariz.), John Campbell (Calif.) — two ardent earmark foes — and Reps. Jeb Hensarling (Texas) and Adam Putnam (Fla.), influential fiscal conservatives who serve in the GOP leadership. Rep. John Doolittle (Calif.), who is retiring at the end of the year and is still under investigation by the FBI for his ties to Jack Abramoff, voted against the bill, as did Rep. Tom Feeney (Fla.), who is also under investigation for links to Abramoff.**

“For now, I support these residents and their wanting to put this money towards another project; I have always supported this community’s right to do what is best for them. That change is in this technical corrections bill and I support it,” Young said.

The technical corrections bill strips the \$10 million from Coconut Road and redirects it to widening and improvements to I-75 in Florida. It also includes language calling on the Department of Justice to investigate the Coconut Road earmark, the first time Congress will ask for an investigation of one of its own members. The Senate first inserted that language into the bill two weeks ago during a heated debate over the best way to investigate the unorthodox earmark change.

Young accused the Senate of “meddling in House affairs” and going down a “slippery, slippery road.”

He also compared the “Coconut Road” change to another made during the same bill enrollment process — clarifying that the Jacksonville mentioned 10 times in the measure was in Florida, and not one of five other cities in the U.S. by that name.

Wednesday's speech marked the third time in a year Young defended a pet project on the House floor.

Last summer he angrily tried to justify his infamous Alaska "Bridge to Nowhere" earmark. A second defense of another program was so hostile that he apologized a few days later to Rep. Scott Garrett (R-N.J).